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THE THEME OF WOMEN EMPOWERMENT IN ELIZA HAYWOOD'S *FANTOMINA* AND
THE BRITISH RECLUSE

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ABSTRACT

Eliza Haywood, writing in the early eighteenth century English literary and cultural space provided a new concept of womanhood and femininity through her amatory works. The amatory novella, a novelistic subgenre, popularized by the women writers of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century England, foregrounded excessive emotion and passion in contrast to the contemporary male writings which dealt with realism in both the theme and technique of representation. Eliza Haywood not only provided a counter tradition to the mainstream male tradition of writing realistic, matter-of-fact fictions through her sensational, erotic prose fictions but raised a strong antipatriarchal voice through the female protagonists of her novellas. As a writer she exploited the trauma and suffering that the female characters in her novels undergo at the hand of self seeking, treacherous males in order to show how the women finally transcend the abject condition by way of applying their power of choice and sense of freedom and emancipation. This paper will discuss two of her important as well as popular novels, *The British Recluse* and *Fantomina*, in order to explore how Haywood subverted prevailing gender ideologies and provided a narrative of female sexuality and empowerment.

Keywords: Amatory Fiction, gender ideology, female sexuality, antipatirarchal voice, women empowerment.

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The genesis of the English novel marked a moment of rupture in the cultural history of late seventeenth and early eighteenth century England. The novel broke away from the earlier tradition of producing and reproducing historical narratives and stood out as a genre of experimentation both thematically and technically. As a cultural product the development of novel cannot be marked by a linear (therefore, incomplete) historical assumption which provides a canonical status to the male authors like Defoe, Richardson, Fielding ignoring the presence of a large body of novelistic production by contemporary female authors like Aphra Behn, Eliza Haywood, Delariviere Manley, Jane Barker etc. These women writers not only equaled their male counterpart in measure of quality, popularity, longevity but they formed a counter tradition of novelistic discourse where they addressed the issues like female sexuality, desire, their actual

position in the patriarchal social structure and thereby offered a form of resistance by questioning the social and moral codes prevailing in contemporary England. This paper will be focusing on two important novels of Eliza Haywood, one of the most successful and prolific writers of the first half of eighteenth century, in order to show how she manipulated and experimented with this genre to create an alternative discourse of female sexuality and empowerment.

One of the three most popular authors of amatory fiction, jointly regarded as 'the Fair Triumvirate of Wit'¹, Eliza Haywood dominated the market of English prose fiction in the decade of 1720s. Greatly influenced by the French *nouvelles* and romances of the seventeenth century, Haywood's amatory novellas foregrounded sentimentalism, eroticism, fantasy in contrast to the moral, realistic and rational mode of the male tradition. Backscheider and Richetti observed that if "social observation" and "psychological depth" are considered the markers of modern novel it was introduced in the prose fictions, long before Richardson and Fielding legitimized it, through the writings of the women amatory novelists such as Aphra Behn, Manley, Haywood, Aubin (Backscheider x). Dr. Johnson's definition of novel as 'a small tale generally of love' is best suited to the amatory fictions which catered the public demand for fictions which would be "shorter, less stylized, immediately appealing to a wider range of taste, more practical and affordable" (Backscheider xi). Thus, the amatory novellas introduced the formula of modern mass market fiction in eighteenth century England.

Haywood's *The British Recluse* and *Fantomina* were published in 1722 and 1725 respectively and sold several copies immediately after the publication. Apparently both the novels dealt with the theme of the female exploitation at the hands of self seeking lustful males and the subsequent trauma that the women had to go through. But on a closer look both the novels actually reflected Haywood's idea of femininity and female agency in a society where the women were considered no more than an object of sexual gratification and exploitation -- a weaker species devoid of reason, activity, knowledge and power. To achieve this end Haywood deployed a number of narrative strategies like self reflexivity, counter gaze, masquerade, disguise and some visual strategies as well.

The novel, *The British recluse or, the Secret Story of Cleomira Suppos'd Dead* is the story of two young girls; Cleomira and Belinda. Both Cleomira and Belinda entered into a passionate relationship with a treacherous man against the consent of their parents and family. Later deserted and betrayed by the lover, Cleomira chose a life of secrecy and seclusion within a chamber of an inn faking her own death before the society. Belinda was also thrown into a similar situation where, away from the family and friend, she was madly in search of the man who deserted her after a heinous crime. Both of them appeared as social rebels as both showed the courage to cross the normative boundary that a society imposed on a woman. Haywood organized the plot following the narrative convention of French romances where both the women told their own story/stories to each other through which the plot of the main narrative progressed only to discover at the end that not only they had a similar storyline (of love-surrender-betrayal and seclusion) to offer but they had a "common betrayer", i. e, Lysander (Cleomira's lover) and Courtal (Belinda's lover) were the same man. Both the heroines had to face the conflict between the free self and the self controlled by the domestic and social codes. Once they chose the former they were meant to suffer. After the revelation of Lysander's ingratitude Cleomira's comment emphasized this point: "I now began to consider whom it was I had abandoned and for whom! And the more I reflected on Lysander's ingratitude, the more ungrateful did I appear myself! To be the occasion of a parent's death...my life filled me with so just a horror that I know not if it would have been even in Lysander's power to have consoled me" (187).

Haywood played on the issue appearance vs. reality throughout the novel. Lysander and/or Courtal trapped the women with his pleasant, handsome appearance unless and until they discovered the villainous and ruinous nature of the man in reality. Cleomira commented on her first impression of Lysander: "I directed my eyes where I perceived ... a Form which appeared more than a Man and nothing inferior to those ideas we conceive of Angels" (163). The city of London also played an important part in this respect. To both of the

¹ The other two writers were Delarivier Manley and Aphra Behn.

female protagonists London appeared to be a centre of happiness, freedom and myriad possibilities but once they entered the city, it brought in all the negative vibes to them. Thus, at the end of the novel both the women chose country over the city to spend the rest of their lives, “despising the uncertain pleasures and free from all the hurries and disquiets which attend the gaieties of the town” (224). In Cleomira’s story, after the social fall out (her mother’s death, Lysander’s marriage etc.), Cleomira attempted to commit suicide following the fictional convention to die a tragic death as a ruined women but after an unsuccessful attempt she made up her mind to change her decision. She let her lover and the society to remain in the misconception that she had died but in reality she continued to live-- “I could not endure to appear publicly in the world again, and as Lysander believed me dead, I was willing everybody else in should do so too” (199). Rather than being condemned to death or being one of the “most exposed and unpitied women” of the world Cleomira chose the fictional identity of a recluse, by claiming a separate space, a space of her own where she could have the power over her own life. Tarin Bonvino says, “Were she to surrender to the social convention of the period she would have become an unpitied woman and were she to surrender to the fictional convention she would have died. Passing as the dead and taking on the identity of a recluse allow Cleomira to live and defy both conventions” (Bonvino 3). In the end both Cleomira and Belinda, together moved to a new country, almost a female utopia, where they lived in “perfect tranquility and happy in the real friendship of each other” (224). The act of becoming a ‘recluse’ may metaphorically be taken as an act of getting silent in the male dominated socio- linguistic structure where women have been silenced historically and culturally too. The solution as Cixous proposed is that “woman must put herself into the text - as into the world and into history - by her own movement,” (Cixous 347) and thereby equating the act of writing with the acquisition of agency. In the novel too through the act of storytelling/ writing the author/ protagonist strived to get hold of that space which so long was barred for them. In a self reflexive way this novel (written by a woman, on the experiences of two women, and intended predominantly for the women readers of eighteenth century England) claimed an alternative space for the woman where she could speak not only her mind but her body too. It is only through writing about her personal experience (so long suppressed and silenced) that the woman could acquire a place of existence socially and culturally which the characters within the novel were finally able to secure in the new space of their “choice”, along with the novelist, by way of establishing this particular genre of amatory novella as a literary form, purely representing the women as the author, text and reader.

Fantomina or love in a Maze is a story of an unidentified aristocratic young woman who adopted a series of disguises— of a prostitute, a maid , a widow, and a masked incognita—as a way, at first, to acquire sexual knowledge and then, as a strategy to retain the sexual attention of her inconstant lover. Throughout the novel, Beauplaisir, the male protagonist, was unaware of the fact, until and unless the young girl herself revealed that he repeatedly enjoyed the same woman who actually be fooled him and enjoyed him physically as well. Here, Haywood went against the contemporary ideological and moral structure in two ways. Firstly, through this novel she provided a new definition of chastity and virtue in love and commitment which affirmed that virtue does not consist in virginity or sexual ignorance but in constancy, that clearly did not conform to the traditional standard of morality. Secondly, she gave her female protagonist the ultimate agency to control the man she wanted. The female protagonist of the novel became physically involved with her lover out of wedlock and when thwarted and almost deserted by the deceitful man she decided to follow him wherever he went and adopted various disguises and identities in order to lure him to sleep with her and continued this relationship with him. Unlike the protagonist of *The British Recluse* it was not the lack of reason and excess of emotion and passion which made *Fantomina* retain a relationship with a faithless lover. Haywood gave her woman protagonist an unconventional touch in this novel. Unlike Cleomira, *Fantomina* did not surrender to Beauplaisir in complete innocence and trust. At the very beginning of their relationship *Fantomina* anticipated the expected betrayal of Beauplaisir:

If he should be false, grow satiated, like other men, I shall but , at the worst, have the private vexation of knowing I have lost him: the intrigue being a secret, my disgrace will be so too...nor will my wrong

excite the mirth or pity of the talking world, It will not be even in the power of my undoer himself to triumph over me. (232-233)

After some time when her anticipation turned to reality she knew how to handle the situation and without being heart-broken at the discovery of the inconstancy of her lover she attempted to teach him and the readers a new definition of constancy in love as the narrator commented,

... wisely considering that complaints, tears, swooning and all the extravagancies which women make use of in such cases, have little prevalence over a heart inclin'd to rove, . . . she resolved to take another course. ...her design was once more to engage him, to hear him sigh, to see him languish, to feel the strenuous pressures of his eager arms, ... (that) was what she wanted, and what she had form'd a stratagem to obtain, in which she promised herself Success. (234)

Masquerade played an important role in the whole narrative. It may be considered a recurrent trope that the narrator deliberately employed in the plot. Fantomina met Beauplaisir in a public masquerade and after that each time they met there happened to be a masquerade because Fantomina continually kept creating an illusory space around him performing separate roles/identities (with different attires, names, gestures, dialects) which Beauplaisir considered as reality. Fantomina was intelligent and strong enough to construct her own story instead of succumbing to what others (the society and the man she loved) had written for her. After Beauplaisir cheated her for the third time, she was hurt and called him a "traitor", but without giving in to despair and mourning, she quickly recovered herself saying, "I have outwitted even the subtle of the deceiving kind, and while he thinks to fool me, is himself the only beguiled person." The irony of situation actually summarizes the whole plot of the narrative where the gender roles (that of victimizer and victimized) were completely and repeatedly reversed:

She made herself, most certainly, extremely happy in the Reflection on the Success of her Stratagems; and while the Knowledge of his Inconstancy and Levity of Nature kept her from having that real Tenderness for him she would else have had, she found the Means of gratifying the Inclination she had for his agreeable Person, in as full a Manner as she could wish. She had all the Sweets of Love, but as yet had tasted none of the Gall, and was in a State of Contentment, which might be envy'd by the more Delicate. (240)

Fantomina held the power and agency to manipulate and exploit Beauplaisir according to her own desire and will. In the whole novel Beauplaisir was relegated to the point of a weak, powerless object which could not but submit to the overwhelming passion of Fantomina. Haywood allowed him no agency at all and in the novel he was nothing more than a sexual toy for Fantomina. On a different note we can take this masquerading strategy of the woman as an act of revenge that she took over the man's expected betrayal. The narrator said, she "suffered" him. But as even nature and society both could not accept this transgression of a woman she was duly punished. At the end of the novel she became pregnant and the sudden arrival of her mother made everything move against her favour. She revealed everything before all and as the punishment of her "crime" she was sent to a monastery in France.

Haywood was writing in a period when the society was operated with strict moral codes, and where the women were not expected to enjoy moral and sexual freedom. Moreover, these fictions were written for a targeted audience for the purpose of marketing and profit making so the writer had to be, at least superficially, conservative, promoting current ideology and prevailing values. Haywood also worked under this restriction but within her fictional space she was able to transcend it and to revise and subvert the traditional masculinist construction of the feminine, a state associated with modesty, passivity, chastity, moral elevation and suffering as circulated by the realistic and domestic novels of the mainstream novelists. Her women are characters with self possession, self respect, intelligence, and courage. Both her novels, discussed above, dealt with the issues related to woman's identity, sexuality and freedom. The title page of *Fantomina* (1725) showed a complete defiance to the tradition of using synopsis title and the terms like 'love', 'secret', 'amour' adorning the title page gave enough indication to the buyers about the amorous subject matter of the novella in an age when Addison and Steele were striving to create a 'taste of polite writing. Pointing out to the rivalry

between the emerging male novelists and the established female fiction writers of the time, Warner commented:

By claiming to inaugurate an entirely “new” species of writing, Richardson and Fielding both seek to assert the fundamental difference of their own projects from these antagonists—the notorious trio of Behn, Manley and Haywood who continue to circulate in the market as threatening rivals in a zero-sum struggle to control a common cultural space and activity. (Bacscheider xiv)

Richetti says, “Eliza Haywood is a major contributor to the history of the early novel whose work is a sustained critique of her society, male female relationships and class politics and this should be recognized and integrated into the studies of the eroticism and wild fantasies typical of her texts” (Bacscheider xiii). Considered as a “female prophet of an oppressed and maligned sex against an organized male conspiracy” (Richetti 181) Eliza Haywood as a writer of amatory fiction in early eighteenth century England provided an alternative tradition which not only stood apart from the measured social realism and moral analysis of the male novel but also in a proto-feminist way left a space where woman could speak for themselves, could represent women’s needs, their hopes and desires and escape the masculine myth of the female.

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